

A LOVE FROM LOSS: A dying woman asks her best friend and her husband to start a new family -- with 10 adopted children

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It wasn't death that longtime foster and adoptive parent Linda Parsons of Taylor feared as she slowly lost her battle to colon cancer.

Parsons' worry was for her kids -- four foster children aged 7 to 17 at the time of her diagnosis in March 2001. She and her husband of 26 years, Bob Parsons, had adopted them all.

And what about Bob?

The answer, Linda Parsons decided, was for him to get together with her best friend, Judi Bradley, a single foster mother who, in 2001, had four adopted foster children of her own and later added two more.

Linda Parsons died at age 54 on Aug. 18, 2005.

And on Oct. 7 of this year, Judi Bradley and



Judi Bradley laughs with Terri Hocking of Howell as she mixes with friends and family after her wedding last month in Dearborn. Bradley and husband Bob met each other in 1993 through fostering children. (MADALYN RUGGIERO/Special to the Free Press)

How you can adopt a child

You don't have to be a perfect person -- or even a married one -- to be an adoptive parent of a child in Michigan's foster care system. You don't even have to be a foster parent first.

But be prepared for a thorough background check, including any criminal convictions, and be ready to provide solid references, state officials said.

There currently are about 4,400 children available for adoption, though plans are in place for many of them.

Many private, nonprofit, child-placing agencies in

Bob Parsons honored her memory as they exchanged wedding vows at Greenfield Village, celebrating with more than 100 adults and 68 children during a raucous party.

At the beginning of Adoption Month in Michigan, the Bradley-Parsons family story is a fitting example of what good foster and adoptive parents do for abused and neglected kids.

And it presents an antidote to the horrific images left by the cases of 7-year-old Ricky Holland and 2-year-olds Isaac Lethbridge and Allison Newman -- Michigan children who died recently in foster or adoptive homes.

Arms always open

Judi Bradley, who became a state-licensed foster parent in 1985, began caring for someone else's children as a teenager. Then living in Redford Township, Bradley helped raise four kids who lived next door and whose mother died of a brain tumor in 1976.

"She just always had such an open heart," one of those kids, Julie Palmer, now 39 of Chesterfield Township,

Michigan provide adoption services even if you do not wish to be a licensed foster parent first. Foster parents who care for children for more than a year generally are given priority when parental rights are terminated and those children are available for adoption.

To learn more, check these organizations:

- The Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange at www.mare.org, or call 800-589-6273 for a list of adoption agencies in your area. The MARE Web site also has information about training for potential adoptive parents who have no experience, and it has a link to biographical sketches of children available for adoption.

- There are hundreds of children in Michigan's foster care system who are available for adoption. Go to www.michigan.gov/dhs to learn how to contact local offices for more information.

Here are other helpful Web sites and phone numbers:

- www.adoptuskids.org or 888-200-4005
- www.nationaladoptionday.org

said of Bradley. "Even when she was younger, she was always taking care of people and not turning anybody away."

• Michigan Adoption Day is Nov. 21. For events, visit the Michigan Supreme Court Web site at [courtshttp://courts.michigan.gov/supremecourt/press/michiganadoptiondayindex.htm](http://courts.michigan.gov/supremecourt/press/michiganadoptiondayindex.htm).

Palmer said Bradley's example led her to become a foster and adoptive parent in Macomb County, though at first she didn't think she could do it.

-- JACK KRESNAK

"After some time and really praying about it, though, I did," Palmer said. "I probably would not have known what foster care was if it hadn't been for watching Judi all those years.

"It's just amazing what her whole life has been about and she still doesn't turn kids away."

Love knows no racial bounds

As a youngster, Bradley, now 48, also helped her parents raise the schizophrenic daughter of a family friend from age 2 to 11 and then became a licensed foster parent to care for the girl until she turned 14.

Bradley then went to college, earning a bachelor's degree in 1992 in early childhood psychology from what was then Mercy College in Detroit. She worked as a licensed social worker and worked at three nonprofit agencies in Wayne County.

As she was leaving one of the agencies, Bradley was concerned about a young boy who had just come into care.

"This little boy stole my heart," Bradley said. "I told the agency if he ever needs a home, call me. Two weeks after I left, they called me."

That child, Eric, is now 20 and in the U.S. Marines serving in Japan, Bradley said.

Bradley's foster children kept coming, the majority of them African-American, including Toyia, who came to Bradley's home in July 1994 as a 6-week-old premature baby.

Toyia was the first of the six foster kids Bradley eventually adopted, despite the reluctance of some foster care workers to sanction adoptions of black children by white foster parents like Bradley.

But Bradley showed a remarkable ability to connect with them and to keep lines of communication open to the children's biological families. She allows her adopted children to see their biological families if the children want to and if the relatives have demonstrated responsible behavior.

"There's no way that I can give them their culture," Bradley said. "I can't. I'm white. I can't pretend to be a black person for these children."

With her professional background, Bradley often fought battles with social workers, lawyers, extended family members and even judges over what she believed was in the best interest for her kids. She won some battles and lost others, but she was known for her willingness to give advice and support to other foster and adoptive parents.

Something clicks

Through fostering, Bradley met Linda and Bob Parsons in 1993. The Parsons also had adopted four foster kids, including Tony, who was then about the same age as Judi's baby Toyia.

Bob Parsons, now 54, is an ironworker who often worked long days, so Judi and Linda would pile all their kids into a van and head out to the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania or to Boston, where Judi said the wheel fell off their van one time in 2003. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

Parsons had met Linda, his second wife, in a Bible study class in 1979. After they were married and living in Southgate, Linda had several miscarriages, so they decided to become foster parents, hoping to adopt.

Their first three foster kids were biological sisters, and Bob and Linda adopted them when they became available. Tony was their fourth adopted child.

Tony and Toyia became fast friends as youngsters and, when they were 6, the families staged a mock wedding ceremony for them at a family cottage on Portage Lake, complete with a Halloween costume wedding dress for Toyia and a tie for Tony.

After her cancer diagnosis in 2001, Linda was in remission for nine months. When the cancer came back in 2002 and Linda was given only four to five months to live, she even suggested that Judi and her kids move in with them. That didn't happen, but Linda continued to say that it was OK with her if Judi and Bob were to fall in love.

Judi said she and Bob always shrugged it off.

"You don't entertain the thought of being with someone else's husband," Judi said.

Said Bob: "I thought to myself, did I really want to start over? ... Did I want to start another family all over again? Did I want a lady with six kids? Things like that went through my head."

But about two months after Linda's death, Bob was helping Judi put together a swing set in the backyard of Judi's home when something clicked.

"She was up on the top, holding something for me, and I was down at the bottom and I looked up at her and something hit me," Bob said. "It just changed the way I was looking at her and the way I felt about her."

They began to date and, a month later, Bob proposed. He knew Linda would have been happy.

"I just feel that she's here and she approves," Bob said. "She was in favor of this all along."

One big family

Bob, who has two grown daughters with his first wife, has moved with his two youngest kids into Judi's eight-bedroom home in western Wayne County.

The blended family now consists of Bob's kids -- Catherine, 34; Deanna, 31; Emma, 23; Roger, 20; Ashley, 18, and Tony, 12 -- and Judi's kids -- Toyia, 12; Tiara, 11; Allison, 9; Sean, 9; Kyle, 5, and Faith, 3.

Catherine and Deanna are Bob's kids from his first marriage, and all of the kids live at home except Roger, Emma, Catherine and Deanna.

"All the kids, they'd been together for so long that it really wasn't a big transition for them," Bob said. "My son and Toyia, they argue like brother and sister."

Pat Hanley of Ferndale, a friend of both Judi and Linda, became a foster and adoptive parent because of their example.

"Adoption is the way to go; I love it," said Hanley, 53. "It's the greatest gift in your life. What I wanted to adopt was a 3-year-old. I got a 7-year-old and I'm thrilled. God gave me the exact kid I would've had anyway."

But being a foster parent is tough, especially when a child must be moved somewhere else or returned to the biological family.

"The greatest joys of my life have come from foster care, and the biggest heartbreak came from foster care," Hanley said. "The whole process, from fostering to adopting, is kind of a miracle."

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